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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 002283

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: ECON PGOV SOCI NI
SUBJECT: EBONYI STATE: FIELD OF DREAMS

Sensitive but Unclassified

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Making something out of Ebonyi state will be a challenge. It's in the middle of nowhere, and with Nigerian agriculture in the doldrums the state's prospects seem modest. It's a new state, though, and to beat the odds its leadership has seized on careful fiscal policy, low overhead and good quality in the civil service, and a emphasis on education. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) As Consulate records show no official visit to the small, new Nigerian state of Ebonyi, we felt the state should no longer be denied the aura of prestige conveyed by our presence in its capital. We attempted to call and set up appointments. None of the phone numbers on hand worked, so we decided simply to go there and see who we could see. The risk in this approach was that lacking adequate notice Ebonyi would miss the opportunity for the pomp and circumstance appropriate to our visit. We could only hope they might detect our approach as we crossed the state line, so from that point we drove slowly. It was easy to find the seat of government in Abakaliki: the town is very small, as is the state of 2.1 million people. To give them extra time to pull themselves together we parked in plain view for some 15 minutes, and then approached Government House.

¶3. (SBU) Governor Sam Egwu was regrettably not "on seat" (he was in Abuja), so we were ushered (respectfully, but no color guard) in to the anteroom of the Chief of Staff to the Governor, Chief M. A. Nwankwu. The anteroom contained a disintegrating sofa with enough room left over for a thin person to slip through into the office beyond. We were invited in promptly and found the Chief of Staff communicating effectively with a small group. Chief Nwankwu had evidently been reading up on his role: on the desk was "Chiefs of Staff to the American Presidents, Kennedy to Carter" and "Effective Small Group Communication." We were curious to see how much time would elapse before visa problems first came up: less than 20 seconds. Apparently Chief Nwankwu's passport has been with Embassy Abuja for an extended period. We commiserated with his misfortune but told him there was nothing we could do. He missed an agriculture show in the U.S., but he still hopes to catch a poultry show next January.

¶4. (SBU) The first thing Chief Nwankwu wanted to emphasize was how important his education in the U.S. had been to him and to others who had studied there. The impact of this capacity building, one individual at a time, could not be overstated, he said. He studied at the University of Northern Colorado and has kept up his contacts there. He wants to establish a relationship between Ebonyi and UNC in the field of education and hopes to take his governor there after they do the poultry show next year.

¶5. (SBU) The second thing he wanted to say was that while Ebonyi is a small place in the middle of nowhere, it has plans and ideas. Carved out of backwater areas of Enugu and Abia States, it became a backwater with a state flag in 1996. It has always ranked very low in the indices used to calculate federal budgetary support, and its educational levels have lagged. Public health is not a pretty picture; press reports indicate it has the highest incidence of guinea worm in the country. Its promising agriculture sector crashed as a casualty of the oil boom (a familiar story in Nigeria), and its rice mill, the largest in Nigeria, closed.

¶6. (SBU) The state has nowhere to go but up, said Nwankwo, and it intends to go there. It has a few important advantages. Its creation was not entirely a virgin birth (it inherited some of Enugu and Abia's debt burden), but it was a clean enough start that its new government began life without the huge overhang of debt and bloated civil service that afflict so many states. Ebonyi, Chief Nwankwo said, has been extremely careful about taking on debt and has kept civil service salaries to about 45 percent of the budget, a much lower number than most Nigerian states (Ebonyi's capital investment is 30-35 percent of the budget, a very high number, with the balance being debt service and social

services). Ebonyi's strategy has been to go for quality: "the right staff, the right caliber." It pays the highest minimum wage of any state. It is the only state in the southeast, he said, which pays federal scale and is current in its salary and pension payments. It will match the federal government's promised 12.5 percent pay raise, but it's going to have to cut funding elsewhere to do it.

17. (SBU) Ebonyi has hired first class consultants to help formulate policies for growth. These focus heavily on education, said Nwankwo. The governor has instituted universal free education (a very expensive proposition, and coverage is far from complete), built a new university, and established a graduate level exchange program with the United Kingdom (112 Ebonyi students are there already, he said). The government is digitizing the telephone system (which is why our numbers didn't work) and has an internet service provider about ready to start.

8 (SBU) Chief Nwankwo told us the Deputy Governor, Dr. Chigozie N. Ogbu, was in town but working at home. He called ahead and sent us over to the official residence, a large dilapidated house with a view over the tin roofed town. We had to wait some minutes, presumably while Dr. Ogbu changed. He finally appeared in resplendent white robes and gold chain. The Deputy Governor turned out to be a doctor from Michigan, a green card holder of many years standing, who has several children in the States. Like Chief Nwankwo, he stressed his gratitude for his education in the U.S., and noted how important his American experience has been (mid-western winters notwithstanding). He discussed Ebonyi's quasi-Appalachian past and (hoped for) education-intensive, knowledge-based future in roughly the same terms as Nwankwo, adding that the state government has assiduously cultivated good labor relations and has never had a strike.

19. (SBU) For a reality check, we stopped by the offices of the National Poverty Eradication Programme for Ebonyi, to see 1A. J. Onwubiko, its director. This turned out to be our third meeting in a row with an American-trained professional. We spent most of the meeting talking about his youth training programs (all cancelled by Abuja at present), but Onwubiko did confirm the thrust of the government's efforts as described by Obgo and Nwankwo, adding that given the level the state is starting from there is going to be a long way to go. It seemed to us that poverty eradication could start in his office: the squalor was Dickensian.

10. (SBU) Comment: "Build it and they will come" (or not). Is Ebonyi a Field of Dreams? The state government is making the best play it can with a weak hand to make Ebonyi an attractive destination: keeping debt low and the state fiscally sound, hiring quality staff and paying them well (and on time), bringing in good communications and pushing education to the hilt. Location is working against them, however. Their road link to Lagos goes through the black hole of Onitsha where traffic jams add hours to the trip. Ebonyi doesn't even have an airport. Visitors fly into neighboring Enugu state, and the government drives over to pick them up. These seem like determined people, but we aren't sure all of this will realistically produce a big improvement in the state's growth rate without a resurgence in Nigerian agriculture to support it. Ebonyi is doing its part: it has just built a large new poultry hatchery. If they can get their passports back and get to the poultry show in January, perhaps they can make it fly.
HINSON-JONES